THE INDYPENDENT

#277: FEBRUARY 2023

FUND DRIVE UPDATE — P2 • SMART PHONE BLUES — P16

DAVID HOLLENBACH

BLACK LOVE

THE FORCE THAT CHANGED AMERICA AND THE WORLD

BY NICHOLAS POWERS — P10

THE INDYPENDENT

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CALENDAR

FEBRUARY

THRU FEB 12 • THU–SAT 8PM & SUN 3PM • $18
THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY: *JOSEPH AND MARSHA*
Based on the life and times of Marsha P. Johnson, this musical play depicts the story of an enduring love between people set against a civil-rights movement, the passage of time and the rising veil of eternity. Directed by Gary LeGault; piano arrangements by Chris Glik. Call (212) 254-1109 for reservations.
155 First Ave.
Manhattan

THRU FEB 16 • $15
FILM FORUM: DINO RISI'S *UNA VITA DIFFICILE*
Lake Como, Northern Italy, 1944. Sordi, a partisan on the run from the Germans, is sheltered, nursed and romanced in an abandoned mill by local innkeeper's daughter Massari, whisking her to Rome after the war to share his shabby flat. Directed by Dino Risi; 1961; 120 min; new 4K restoration. See bit.ly/3DAZSAK for showtimes.
209 W Houston St.
Manhattan

FEB 16 • 6:30PM–8:30PM • FREE
SCHOMBURG CENTER: HARLEM CHAMBER PLAYERS BLACK HISTORY MONTH CONCERT
This live music concert will feature the world premiere of Aruán Ortiz's "Episodes in an Unforeseen Departure" as well as solo works for piano and music by Valerie Coleman, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and Terrance McKnight's own juxtapositions of Langston Hughes' poetry as spoken word over piano works by Beethoven.
515 Malcolm X Blvd.
Manhattan

FEB 16 • 7PM • $15 OR $7 SUGGESTED
MAYSLES DOCUMENTARY CENTER: *IS THAT BLACK ENOUGH FOR YOU?!?*
From celebrated writer and film historian Elvis Mitchell, *Is That Black Enough For You?!?* is both a documentary and deeply personal essay. The film examines the craft and power of cinema from a perspective often overlooked: the African American contribution to films released-from the landmark era of the 1970s.
343 Lenox Ave/Malcolm X Blvd
Manhattan

FEB 18 • 7PM–9PM • FREE
THE PEOPLE'S FORUM: BEYOND YIMBY/NIMBY BINARY
Leaky ceilings in the bathroom, a mouse infestation in the kitchen, lack of heat throughout the house – on top of that, the rent on the next lease is pricing people out. What do we do? Beyond YIMBY/NIMBY Binary: Towards Working Class Control of Housing and Land is a panel led by socialist organizers from NYC-DSA who have been wrestling with this question for years on a grassroots level. Go to bit.ly/3XTlujl to register.
320 W 37th St
Manhattan

FEB 22 • 7PM–10PM • FREE
I'M FINNA TALK: ROSE PLANT MEDICINE WORKSHOP/OPEN MIC
This workshop, presented by I'm Finna Talk and led by Brooklyn-based herbalist Magenta Rootz, will highlight the benefits of roses to one's mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health. Folks will also have the opportunity to learn about the history of rose and new ways of incorporating it into one's routine. Then create your own personal rose oil. After the workshop, there will be an Open Mic – participation encouraged!
NOWADAYS
56-06 Cooper Ave
Queens

FEB 24–JUN 11
KARA WALKER: HARPER'S PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR
For over two decades, Kara Walker has been making work that weaves together imagery from the antebellum South, the brutality of slavery and racist stereotypes. Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated) is a series of 15 prints based on the two-volume anthology published in 1866 that notes the omission of African Americans from this narrative.
NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park West
Manhattan

FEB 21 • 7PM–8:30PM • FREE
BPL & CENTER FOR BROOKLYN HISTORY: *THE BIG MYTH*
Naomi Oreskes will discuss her new book, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* in conversation with Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz and journalist Claudia Dreifus. *The Big Myth* is a sweeping history of the disastrous and all-consuming belief that has had a grip on the American public for decades: "the magic of the marketplace." How did so many Americans come to have so much faith in markets and so little faith in government?
THE BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY, DWECK CENTER
10 Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn

FEB 25 • 8PM–10:20PM • $20 SUGGESTED
LOST IN THE STARS: THE MUSIC OF KURT WEILL
Romanian-born Sanda Weigl radically re-imagines the music of Kurt Weill in a program that blends cabaret, 20th century classical avant-garde songs with jazz and downtown New York experimentalism. Weill was a German-born American composer who was best known for his fruitful collaborations with Bertolt Brecht. See viewcy.com/e/sanda_weigl__lost_in for tickets.
BARBÈS
376 9th St
Brooklyn

'70s CINEMA: *The original movie poster for* Is That Black Enough for You?!? *which will play at Harlem's Maysles Cinema on Feb. 16.*

FEB 27–MAY 1 • 6PM–9PM • $300–$400 SLIDING SCALE FOR 30 HOURS
ALGARABÍA LANGUAGE CO-OP: ARABIC LANGUAGE CLASSES SPRING 2023
For those who are interested in learning Arabic with a focus on topics of social justice, cinema, media and culture. Using a communicative and popular-education approach, participants will improve their Arabic skills and critically engage with various cultural productions in Arabic. Courses are available for levels beginner through intermediate. Special focus will be given to learning vocabulary and community organizing terminology relevant to contemporary social movements in the United States and the Arab world. Late applications will be considered if spots are still available. See bit.ly/3XZbTZ2 to sign up. Contact algarabialanguage@gmail.com for questions.
CLASS MEETS VIRTUALLY ON ZOOM

THRU AUG 13 • WED–SUN 11AM–6PM • PAY AS YOU WISH
BROOKLYN MUSEUM: MARY ENOCH ELIZABETH BAXTER, "AIN'T I A WOMAN"
On the fiftieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* – and in the year after its overturning – this exhibition examines the long history of reproductive injustice in the United States through two projects by Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter. The artist and advocate centers storytelling and healing in work that explores the institutional, legal and cultural processes that have stripped Black women and girls of their bodily autonomy.
200 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn

FUND DRIVE UPDATE

WE'VE RAISED $32,507 SO FAR IN OUR ANNUAL WINTER FUND DRIVE, OR ALMOST TWO-THIRDS OF OUR GOAL OF $50,000. TO REACH OUR GOAL, WE'VE EXTENDED OUR FUND DRIVE FINAL DEADLINE TO MARCH 1. IF YOU VALUE THE INDY, PLEASE STEP UP. AND IF YOU HAVE A LITTLE EXTRA, PLEASE GIVE FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T.

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Twitter employees are having to supply their own toilet paper since Elon Musk fired the company's unionized office cleaners.

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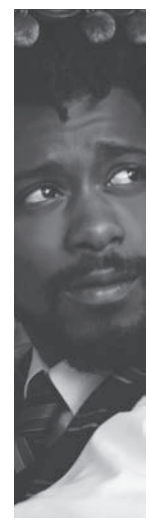

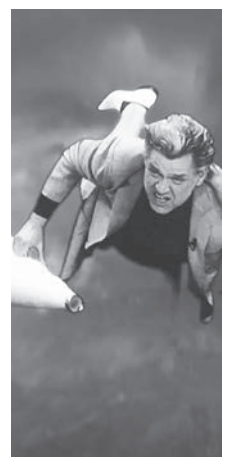

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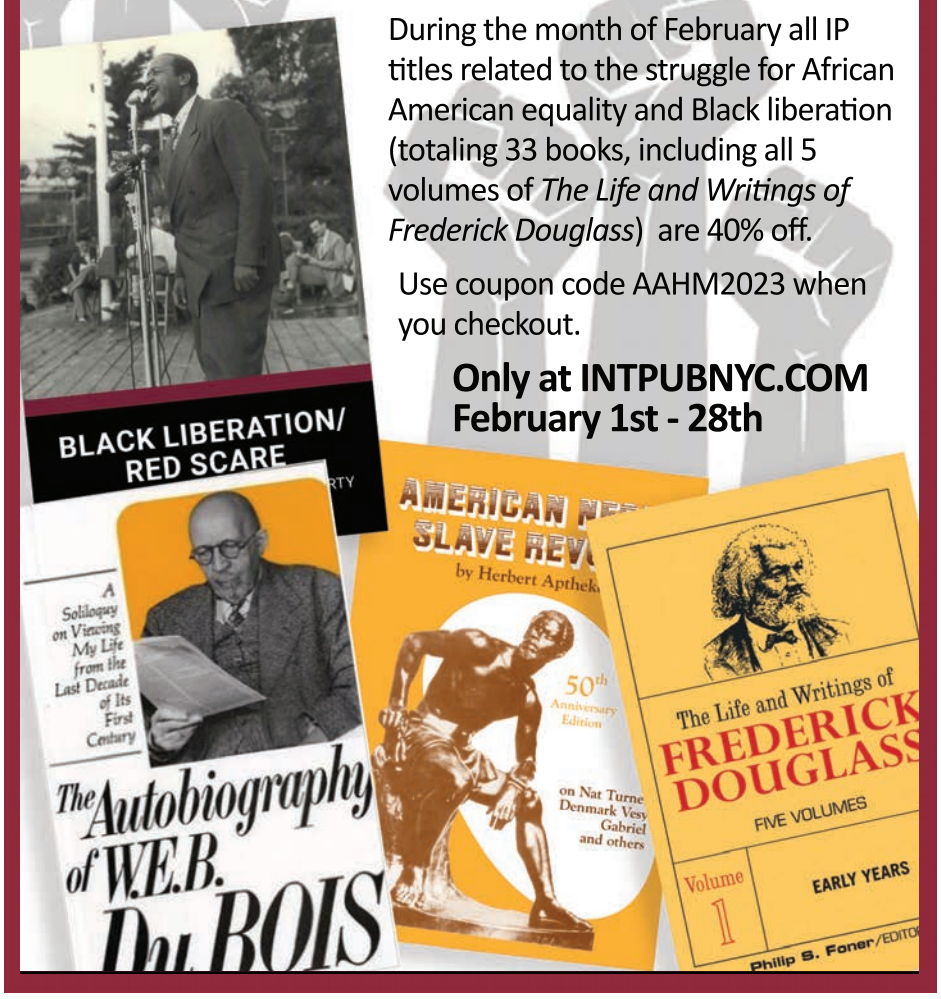
BLACK LIBERATION/ RED SCARE
A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century
The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBOIS
AMERICAN
SLAVE REV
by Herbert Aptheker
50th Anniversary Edition
on Nat Turner Denmark Vesey Gabriel and others
The Life and Writings of
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
FIVE VOLUMES
Volume 1
EARLY YEARS
Philip S. Foner/EDITOR

TYRONE WALLACE

UP IN SMOKE

MASSIVE EVIDENCE WAREHOUSE FIRE PUTS EXONERATION CASES IN PERIL

By Theodore Hamm

A murder case in which the NYPD found a necktie and wire hanger at the scene. Another homicide after which officers vouchered the victim's coat and the assailant's hat. Video from a fight in stalled traffic on the Queensboro Bridge that resulted in a CrimeStoppers poster of the suspect.

These are just a few cases in which local district attorney offices have sought to review evidence in order to potentially overturn a conviction, only to be informed that the NYPD could not find the case material.

The problem briefly came to light in the wake of the large mid-December fire at the NYPD storage facility in Red Hook. A vast trove of evidence that could prove pivotal in exoneration claims went up in flames. As of the end of January, the Legal Aid Society still had not received a full account of how many cases are involved.

According to exoneration advocates, the problem is not simply that the NYPD maintains poor storage practices. The bigger issue is that there is no law governing how any police departments in New York State must handle evidence after a case is initially resolved.

This means that the city's Law Department oversees the current policies, working closely with the NYPD's Legal Bureau. The manner in which a recent post-conviction inquiry stalled shows why this process needs state oversight.

In early 2020, Queens DA Melinda Katz's Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) launched an investigation into the 2012 conviction of Joseph Meyer for beating up off-duty police officer Damien Bartels during the aforementioned fight on the Queensboro Bridge.

Bartels had described the assailant as several inches shorter than Meyer, and made no mention of Meyer's arm-sleeve tattoos, which likely would have been visible in the August 2009 incident. Case detective reports (called DD-5's) noted that a CrimeStoppers poster showing the culprit used a still from surveillance footage.

At the end of 2020, Queens CIU director Bryce Benjet nonetheless informed Meyer's attorney John O'Hara that the unit was closing its investigation into the case because the NYPD "was unable to locate any video, photo or wanted posters mentioned in the DD-5's."

In his letter to O'Hara, Benjet cited a statement from a managing attorney in the NYPD's Legal Bureau. That lawyer cited a 2017 departmental policy directing that material from cases prior to 2010 need not be preserved. Moreover, the same attorney noted, "it is possible that the file was being stored in one of our warehouses which were flooded during Superstorm Sandy in 2012."

Such a runaround is hardly reassuring for any convicted prisoner fighting for exoneration. Released last year on parole, Meyer is back working construction in Queens. His trial prosecutor, Christine Oliveri, handles police accountability cases in Katz's office.

New York lags behind 35 other states, including Indiana, in terms of its lack of evidence preservation laws. Exoneration advocates point to Connecticut as a potential model. That state requires the preservation of case evidence until a prisoner's sentence ends.

The Innocence Project has lobbied for other states to adopt variations of Connecticut's laws. Vanessa Potkin, director of special litigation at the Innocence Project, says that "at a minimum, New York should require that evidence is preserved as long as a person is incarcerated." The legislature could debate whether to extend that time frame.

Evidence-preservation legislation also could specify how case material is stored, says Elizabeth Felber, who heads the wrongful conviction unit at the Legal Aid Society. The Red Hook facility was one of the NYPD sites that flooded during Superstorm Sandy. Safe storage practices could be required under a new law.

So, too, could penalties for non-compliance. Currently, Felber notes, "There is a lack of accountability when the NYPD loses evidence — no redress, just excuses."

Both Potkin and Felber hope that the recent disaster results in Albany legislators taking action.

"We recognize the devastation of the Red Hook fire because it was massive and happened all at once," says Potkin. "But for wrongfully convicted people, not having an evidence preservation law is essentially the same as a fire every day, because there is nothing preventing their evidence from being destroyed or discarded at any time."

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SUE BRISK

AGAINST POLICE IMPUNITY: *Protesters converge on Times Square after videos of the police killing of Tyre Nichols were made public on Jan. 27.*

TIME TO SCRAP THE USELESS CIVILIAN COMPLAINT REVIEW BOARD

By John Teufel

The Civilian Complaint Review Board — the city agency ostensibly responsible for oversight of the NYPD — was created in 1953 and molded into its current form in 1993, when then-Mayor David Dinkins convinced the City Council to remove the CCRB from the NYPD's direct jurisdiction and make it an independent agency. This action led to a drunken police riot at City Hall, where infuriated officers gathered to hurl racial slurs at the mayor. But those racist cops needn't have worried — the CCRB never escaped the tentacles of the NYPD, and this is by design. Recent developments have seen the CCRB (where I worked from 2006–2008) hit a low point, which is really saying something. Nowadays, the police commissioner can publicly tell the CCRB to blow off, get lost, arrivederci, and leadership of this alleged oversight agency responds with "Thank you sir, may I have another."

Historically, the CCRB has been a backbencher city agency, run by a mayoral ally (the last guy also officiated de Blasio's wedding) and given little press attention. When front-page police misconduct occurs, the papers briefly remember its existence, only to lose interest once they realize CCRB has no news to give them. For example, after Daniel Pantaleo murdered Eric Garner, it took the CCRB three years to substantiate any misconduct against the officer, and another two before Pantaleo was ultimately fired at the behest of the police commissioner. In the interim, the CCRB had nothing to say about the matter, even though it was the most public police killing since Sean Bell in 2006 (time it took for killers of Sean Bell to be fired: six years).

George Floyd's murder sparked another round of interest in the CCRB, and for many occasioned the first time they found out that all the CCRB can do is "recommend" discipline to the NYPD — they cannot actually punish cops. The ACLU found that from 2000 to 2020, the NYPD reduced or eliminated recommended CCRB discipline in a whopping 74% of CCRB cases. Only one percent — one percent! — of cases over the same period ended in some sort of serious discipline, and even that statistic is too generous, as losing one vacation day is considered "serious." Indeed, since 2015, only seven officers have been fired for misconduct, and in each case it was only after the officer lied to internal NYPD investigators or was convicted of a crime.

The CCRB's impotence thus became one focus of the police reform movement in New York, along with more radical propositions like abolition or defunding. Because it felt like a more "moderate" position, politicians flocked to the issue of discipline. In January 2021, the City Council introduced a slate of bills that would, in theory, improve police accountability if they became law, the most important of which would strip the police commissioner of sole and final authority to mete out punishment to cops. The next month, in response to public pressure, and desperate to give vulnerable councilmembers cover to vote down any serious disciplinary laws, CCRB Chair Fred Davie (the guy who did de Blasio's wedding) announced that he had reached an "agreement" with NYPD that would — again, in theory, always in theory — dramatically reduce the number of CCRB findings ignored or modified by the NYPD.

The mechanism by which this change was to occur was a "Memorandum of Understanding" between CCRB and NYPD. The memorandum put in place a disciplinary matrix, a system of factors and rules CCRB and NYPD would presumptively adhere to when meting out police discipline. The stated goal was to ensure that cops were punished consistently and fairly, and remove some of the subjective decision-making previously inherent in the process. Of note, the memorandum specifically stated that only in an "extraordinary circumstance" would the NYPD or CCRB deviate from the matrix.

In March 2021 — the month after the memo was signed — the council voted on the slate of police bills. By that time, the bill that would disempower the police commissioner had been reduced to a gentle request that the state legislature make the change instead of the City Council, a fairly shameful example of buck-passing. This neutered bill passed. The state legislature never acted on it.

As for the memo, anyone with knowledge of how the NYPD consistently protected its own could see how useless it would be. At the next public board meeting, I showed up and asked Davie why on earth he would think NYPD would comply with its terms, given their historic treatment of CCRB recommendations. He blew off the question and went on one of his famous soliloquies about his great working relationship with NYPD leadership, and his trust and faith in them to live up to their side of the agreement. The meeting was on Zoom but I like to think if it was in person you would have heard groans from the crowd, like a stand-up comic bombing spectacularly.

How did that work out? Well, of the 80 cops the CCRB recommended be disciplined for George Floyd protest-related misconduct, the NYPD disciplined exactly three. The CCRB's 2021 annual report noted that for serious cases — those leading to formal charges — the NYPD concurred with the CCRB's recommendation only 27% of the time.

Last month, NYPD Commissioner Keechant Sewell delivered the coup de grace, which somehow felt both excessively cruel and completely predictable. In a message to her rank and file, Sewell boasted that she overturned CCRB findings more than previous commissioners, citing the 70-plus cases in which she reduced or eliminated punishment. Sewell also announced that she would be — apparently unilaterally — modifying the disciplinary guidelines to reduce punishments on officers.

Remove the bureaucratic niceties and this is just one party to an agreement declaring that they will no longer abide by the agreement. It's your boss saying he's decided not to pay you for that last week you worked. One would think this very public cucking would occasion a ferocious and proud response from the CCRB. Guess again!

One would think! Take it away, CCRB Chair Arva Rice: "I'm not surprised that at this point in time we're looking back at the discipline matrix," Rice told *Inside City Hall*'s Errol Louis, "I want to continue to have a positive relationship with [Sewell] in order that we can make these changes that are clearly necessary to the matrix." Not once during this interview did Rice criticize Sewell for tossing out so many CCRB recommendations.

This is not an oversight board. It exists at the whim of the NYPD and its most prolific defender, Eric Adams. The CCRB may legally be an "agency" but it has no agency. It's been so neutered and degraded that it can now only express love and admiration for its abuser. CCRB is a balloon floating through the winds of New York City politics, and when it brushes against the NYPD they knock it aside. The only reason no one's popped it yet is that it serves the important function of making it seem like someone is overseeing the only New Yorkers who enjoy a monopoly on violence.

I say pop it. Stop feeding New Yorkers a line of nonsense about police accountability, stop maintaining the illusion that cops will be punished when they do awful things. If we're tossing out the disciplinary matrix, let's also junk the larger matrix, the carefully constructed façade in which the police aren't just freewheeling thugs who answer to no one. The NYPD doesn't take CCRB seriously. Neither should we.

John Teufel is a freelance writer and attorney who successfully sued New York City in 2021 to force the release of NYPD disciplinary records.

SUE BRISK

LAURA JANE BREIT

IN SEARCH OF A HOME

MIGRANTS DEMAND HUMANE HOUSING AS CITY TRIES TO REVIVE TENT CITY PLAN

OCCUPY THE SIDEWALK: *Migrants staged a three-day protest encampment outside The Watson Hotel at 440 W. 57th St. to demand humane lodging.*

UNCERTAIN FUTURE: *Protesting migrants have traveled thousands of miles seeking safety, but many didn't plan to end up as far from the southern border as New York City.*

By Derek Ludovici & Amba Guerguerian

Since June, busloads of asylum-seeking migrants had been arriving in New York City, sent by Texas Governor Greg Abbott from border towns. Some said they were forced on the bus, or misinformed about its destination. Across the board, migrants were told in Texas they would find helpful services and resources in New York. Since the start of Abbott's bussing policy, other border states have joined in the practice, with more than 40,000 asylum seekers having arrived in the city, at least 22,000 of which have stayed.

In a break with normal migration patterns, many of these asylum seekers don't have family or friends here, making them more dependent on City services. Under the "right to shelter" guaranteed in the New York State Constitution, the City must provide shelter to anyone who seeks it on any given night.

Patrick and his family arrived in New York City at the end of October, a journey that began over a decade earlier. Originally from Haiti, he moved to Brazil where he resided for 10 years before leaving due to racism in the country. Patrick, like most, endured an arduous overland journey to the U.S. border that included serious threats in Mexico, where, if Haitians weren't able to bribe Mexican officials, they would be held in detention and treated cruelly.

Once Patrick and his family made it through the Border Patrol detention camp in Texas with their asylum claim, they were placed on a 40-plus-hour bus ride to New York. Upon arrival, they had to navigate the City's bureaucracy. Many of those with families, like Patrick, end up in one of the city's Humanitarian Emergency Response and Relief Centers (HERRC), mainly hotels contracted by the city to act as homeless shelters.

Mayor Eric Adams, who stated "there is no more room in the inn" when he traveled to El Paso, Texas in early January, has increasingly hinted that the city's right to shelter does not apply to migrants.

A Dec. 15 report from the City Comptroller Brad Lander estimated that the migrant influx is costing the City around $1 billion annually — which the federal government has refused to subsidize. The Biden administration only recently announced it would loosen restrictions that have thus barred the migrants from getting work permits. This has made them more likely to rely on the City and more vulnerable to low or stolen wages and dangerous working conditions if they choose to seek employment illegally.

Patrick told his story on Dec. 20 at a migrant-organized speak-out at Holyrood Church in Washington Heights. The organizers claimed basic items such as clothing and hot meals have been withheld from them at the Midtown hotels contracted as HERRCs where they're staying. These items were provided at the speak-out by the event's sponsors, South Bronx Mutual Aid (SBXMA) and La Morada Restaurant.

Most of the speakers were from the Row NYC Hotel and New York Manhattan Hotel (NYMA) where staff has been accused of verbal abuse and threats. "I understand when the workers are saying insults about us in English," Patrick said.

Another migrant resident said, "We are constantly told that we will be removed from the hotel or deported if we say anything. We are threatened if anyone, for example, doesn't have their key on them at a given time."

One mother spoke about how her family was removed to the street after a verbal disagreement with security led to staff tasing her husband. They terminated the family's stay when she asked to speak to the police.

Not all staff have been accused of abuse. Sally Saval was terminated from the Row by text message on Nov. 22, just 12 days after being hired. She claims this was in retaliation for attempting to secure more resources for migrants. "I got fired for doing my job. I got fired because I was advocating for them."

"We are not given access to warm food. The food is often frozen. It's not fit to eat. At times it appears they [giving people] raw food." said Natalie, a migrant from Venezuela, speaking to the dietary conditions at the Row. "Many people have gotten sick. We are only given this food at night, so during the day what we have [is] maybe bread, water or an apple to eat."

Advocates have criticized the HERRCs for not only failing to provide essential resources, but for preventing mutual aid groups from directly distributing goods. "When I did a distro at NYMA, the security guard, who is contracted by the City, she called the cops on me," said Desiree Joy Fria of SBXMA.

"Many of these reported incidents are not exclusive to one hotel or to one shelter, and many, if not most, unhoused New Yorkers have universally experienced these types of abuses for a sustained period of time," said Ariadna Phillips of SBXMA at the speak-out. SBXMA is a part of the Mutual Aid Collective, a network spread across the city that has been providing migrants support since they started arriving. Many of its participating mutual-aid groups sprung up during the 2020 George Floyd uprising.

The Collective, some NGOs and other solidarity groups have committed to supporting arriving migrants, assisting them as they navigate what the City has to offer in the way of shelters, schools and medical care as well as organizing the collection and distribution of essential items. And New Yorkers who have heard about the migrants' needs have donated essential supplies. One grade school in Queens asked the Astoria Food Pantry for jackets, boots, gloves, hats and socks for around 100 migrant students, which the organization crowd funded and distributed between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

In September, Adams had a tent city built for the migrants in the sprawling Orchard Beach parking lot in the far corner of northeast Bronx. A video shared on social media by Phillips that showed the area flooding was widely viewed, helping to spark an outcry that forced the City to move the planned refugee camp to Randall's Island. Within a month, that facility, which was difficult to access via public transport, was also scrapped. The City sent its occupants, single men, to The Watson Hotel on W. 57 St. It is now executing its third tent-city plan, which is to move the men from The Watson to a camp in Red Hook at the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal — until May, when cruise season resumes.

The Red Hook camp has around 1,000 beds and 80 bathrooms. The cots have one layer of cloth and the sheets and thin blankets provided are not sufficient to keep people warm in the winter.

The City began evicting migrants from The Watson Hotel on Jan. 29. Around 50 of the evicted men swiftly organized a protest camp beneath scaffolding on the sidewalk outside the hotel. They had found part-

Continued on page 13

NYC BRIEFS

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

BUDGET BATTLE BEGINS: *Mayor Eric Adams and the City Council have to reach agreement on the City's 2024 budget by June 30.*

ADAMS' AUSTERITY BUDGET

Mayor Eric Adams called for a "new era of abundance" in his State of the City speech on Jan. 26, but his proposed city budget for the 2024 fiscal year, announced Jan. 12, is more like austerity. The $102.7 billion in projected spending is an estimated $5 billion less than was spent last year. It would cut more than $200 million from the budget for schools, $168 billion from the City University system and $41.6 million from libraries. Funding for police, however, would remain largely the same, at around $10 billion. The city took in $1.7 billion more revenue than it expected in fiscal year 2023, the Office of Management and Budget said, but it also faces unexpected expenses such as sheltering asylum-seeking immigrants. The budget would also cut staff by 6% at the Human Resources Administration and 5% at the Department of Homeless Services. "This is the wrong decision when there are a record number of people in the City's shelters," the New York Housing Conference said. The City's five main housing agencies already have more than 2,700 vacant positions, 14% of the total.

POLICE OVERTIME EXCESS

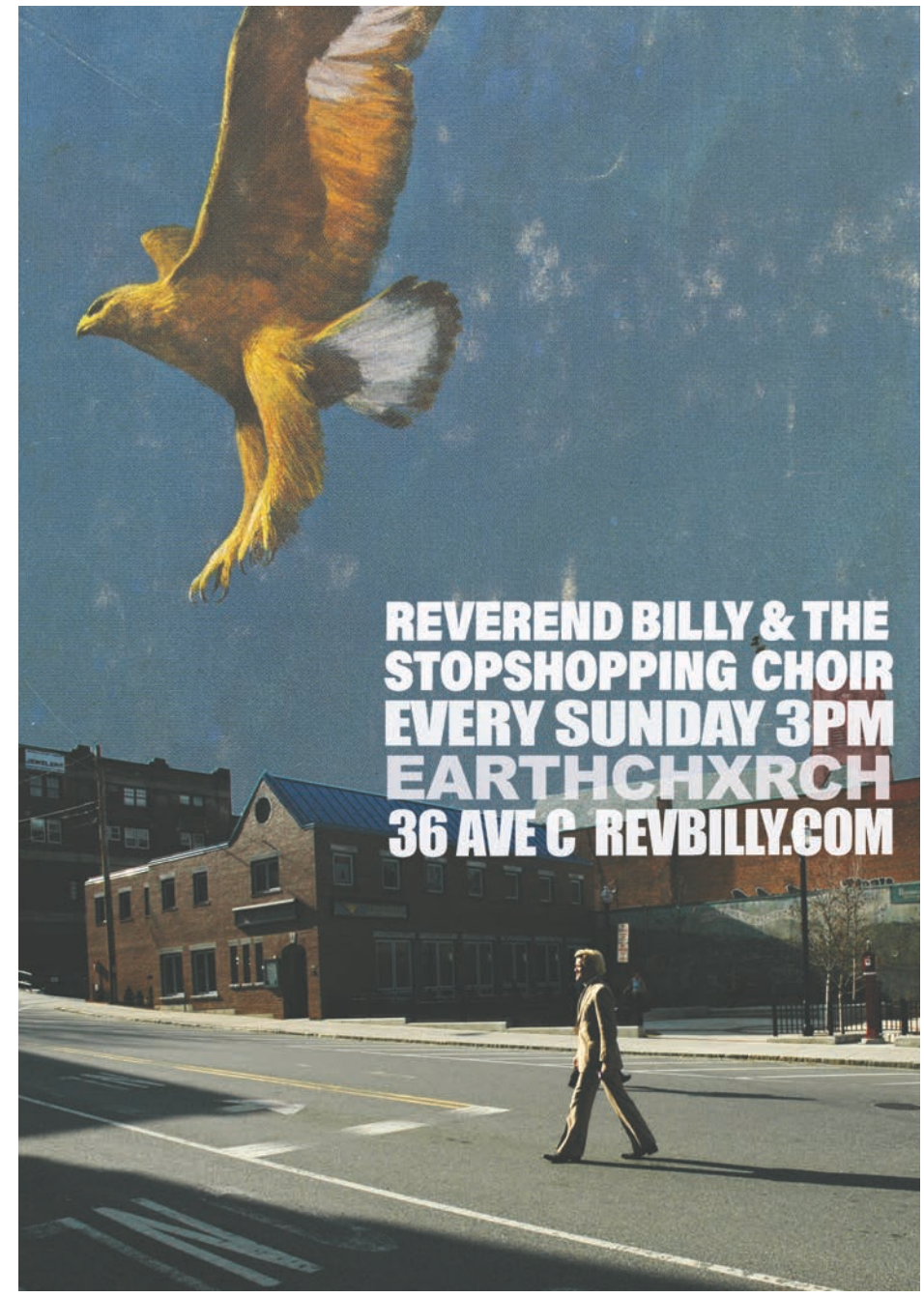
New York City's budget drastically underestimates the cost of police overtime. The current fiscal year's budget appropriated $454.8 million to cover overtime, but as of Dec. 31, the NYPD had already spent $412 million of that in six months, meaning that the actual cost might exceed $820 million. In the 2022 fiscal year, it budgeted $513 million for overtime and spent $777.9 million. Mayor Adams said the extra cost was money well spent, telling reporters after he announced his 2024 budget proposal Jan. 12 that "the successful use of our manpower allowed us to accomplish what we needed to accomplish" in reducing subway crime. His proposed budget slates $452 million for overtime, a figure The City reporter Greg B. Smith said "seems highly unrealistic."

CITY COUNCIL RACES HEAT UP

Due to redistricting, all 51 City Council members will be running for re-election this year in newly drawn districts. Most contests will be determined by who wins their party primaries on June 27. While many incumbents are expected to coast to victory, some primary races are already heating up. In District 9 in Harlem, leftist Kristin Richardson Jordan has drawn three challengers: Assemblymembers Inez Dickens and Al Taylor as well as Yusef Salaam, a member of the Exonerated 5, the group of five Harlem teenagers who were wrongfully convicted and sent to prison three decades ago in the infamous Central Park jogger rape case. Meanwhile, in District 26 in western Queens, incumbent Julie Won is being challenged by Hailie Kim, a democratic socialist. Kim has criticized Won for backing last year's city budget which defunded public schools by $469 million while leaving the NYPD's budget untouched.

NO NEW NOMINEE FOR STATE'S TOP COURT

After the state Senate Judiciary Committee voted 10-9 against Gov. Kathy Hochul's nomination of Hector LaSalle as Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals on Jan. 18, Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins told reporters "this nominee was rejected, and that's it." LaSalle, a state appeals-court judge, drew opposition from socialist and liberal Democrats, abortion-rights advocates and labor unions for a number of decisions — primarily one that let Cablevision sue union officials personally for things they said at a union rally and one preventing the state Attorney General's office from examining the promotional materials of an anti-abortion "crisis pregnancy center" being investigated for fraud. Gov. Hochul, however, insisted that the state constitution "requires action by the full Senate" on nominees, and the Buffalo News reported that she was talking with a lawyer about suing the Senate. As of Jan. 31, the Court of Appeals had apparently not formally announced a vacancy, meaning no one else could be nominated.



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LAURA JANE BRETT

NEW HORIZONS: *Drag story hour organizer Frankie Dascola.*

'WHY WOULD YOU DISRUPT JOY?'

DRAG STORY HOUR ORGANIZER UNBOWED BY THE HATERS

By Nicky Yeager

To Queens-based educator Frankie Dascola, Drag Story Hours — bright, glittery events at schools and libraries in which drag performers dress up and read storytime for kids — offer clear positives for child development. Created as a literacy and arts program, DSH's mission is to celebrate reading through "the glamorous art of drag" and invite families to a program "where kids can express their authentic selves."

Stated simply, it's just fun. As Dascola puts it, "Why would you disrupt joy?"

Not everyone shares this view. In the past two months, protesters have shown up to Drag Story Hours in Staten Island, Chelsea, and Jackson Heights, stirred by "groomer" rhetoric and the surging moral panic over gender nonconformity. Dascola was among over 300 counter-protesters in Jackson Heights in December who turned the defense of DSH NYC into a colorful, joyous dance party in the streets.

Not only are we defending the ability of non-gender-conforming people to occupy public space, but we are fighting to protect drag and Drag Story Hours as a form of social infrastructure.

Dascola is a teacher at IS93 in Ridgewood, which has a social-emotional learning curriculum. Dascola is an advisor for their school's Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and a board member at the DSH NYC nonprofit organization. "I see my role as a board member as helping to educate a populace," says Dascola, who predominantly presents feminine at work. "I go by Mx. as my prefix to bring awareness to the non-binary and the gender-nonconforming in general," they say. "I am a non-presenting transmasculine individual. What does that mean? Well, I do feel like a dude trapped in a chick's body. I do feel like I have the wrong parts, my dysphoria is unreal."

"I have no pronoun preference, it's whatever keeps the conversation going or just my name," Dascola told *The Indypendent*.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

THE INDYPENDENT: Why are Drag Story Hours important?

FRANKIE DASCOLA: It allows the kids to see so many different types of possibilities of who they could be and who can be in front of them. For example, Bella Noche is one of the readers from Long Island. She's our mermaid-in-residence. She's also part of the dual language program that DSH NYC runs. Thirty percent of my school is English as a new language. We make sure to incorporate the dual language aspect, to show brown people being queer and being successful.

Part of DSH NYC is teaching those social-emotional skills, interactive skills, how to just be part of society. Self love, self expression, decision making. So often we have to decide: when are we coming out? What is safe, what isn't safe? How do we work as a community to elevate those who need to be elevated?

I'll never forget the way kids react. "Oh my God, I didn't know that you could do that! Oh, that's me!" I say it every time other staff come into the room. You may get to see a child in a space you've never gotten to see before. Their joy, their happiness might happen for the first time now.

What about your experience as a young person led you to be so involved in DSH NYC?

Growing up in public schools in Chicago, I never saw or heard anything about queerness until high school and never once saw a teacher stand up for us. That hit me pretty hard in college, when I was learning about my own queerness and woeful lack of queer support. For all the amazing and wonderful people I had growing up, you think someone would've realized "Oh, Frankie needs some help."

Knowing what I know now, I can't help but be brought to where I am now, in NYC, willing to put my career on the line when I go protest so these students can have a safe place. I want all my students to know someone does fight for them, even if they don't understand or know what's happening.

Talk more about the programs DSH NYC offers.

We offer programs for senior citizens. We have a program for audience members with autism. So we understand that audience members might be up, more vocal, might not be able to sit still. We do readings in Cantonese, Spanish and French. We're looking to expand to more languages and to do programs specifically with homeless queer youth.

What sorts of things have you had to deal with as an advocate and board member?

It is a surreal experience waking up to an email from Homeland Security saying, "Your organization needs to be on high alert. And for board members of DSH NYC it's a good idea to run a threat assessment." I've had to have conversations with my partners and roommates where I say, "Don't ever let someone in for my apartment number." Look at what happened to Chelsea City Councilmember Erik Bottcher. His neighbor was assaulted by protesters of DSH NYC. A month later City Councilmember Shekar Krishnan's home was vandalized near Jackson Heights.

The threat level has increased tenfold. I've had parents and colleagues opt out of DSH NYC readings or participating in a protest out of fear of losing a job. There's fear that some of my storytellers have. We're going to be doing de-escalation workshops with the Anti-Violence Project. I am willing to take a bullet for this organization, but why should I have to?

I also got harassed by the *New York Post*. They called my school twice.

How do you feel when people target you and this work?

I get so disheartened and irritated. It weighs on me. There's an effect that rhetoric has on me. I'm a strong individual. I got pretty thick skin. But that doesn't mean I'm not scared, not concerned for those who don't have as thick a skin as I do, right?

Why do you think drag is being criminalized?

Because it gives people an outlet to be different. It gives people a way to show dissent about the way things are. Is drag a form of protest? I firmly think it is.

We have such an opportunity to influence queer curriculum and queer education. When we center the non-white experience, when we center the non-queen voice, bringing in drag kings and non-binary individuals, we're allowing everyone to be who they are. That's where the protesters and the alt-right have the real problem. Drag is for everyone. We don't exclude anyone. We look to elevate those who haven't had a chance to be elevated. When the criminalization happens, the othering happens, it's a tool of fracturing. And what drag does is bring us together.

SAFIYAH RIDDLE

UNIVERSAL NO MORE

PARENTS SCRAMBLE AS ADAMS HALTS EXPANSION OF 3-K CHILDCARE PROGRAMS

By Safiyah Riddle

At only 15 months old, Lupe Hernandez's eldest son Nico was diagnosed with autism by a city-funded, free early childcare program. Until he was old enough to enroll in kindergarten, he received free physical and occupational therapy to aid his development. Now, Hernandez is hoping to enroll Nico's little brother, who turned three this month, into one of the city's free programs.

But an email sent by the Department of Education about a Jan. 20 enrollment deadline also issued a warning: "Please note that due to limited seat availability, not all 3-K applicants will be guaranteed an offer."

Mayor Adams' most recent 2024 budget proposal would cut 3-K funding $567 million by halting the expansion of the city's universal 3-K early childhood education programs.

Universal 3-K and pre-K was the crowning achievement of former Mayor Bill de Blasio and became a model for cities across the country. By the end of his tenure, de Blasio allotted nearly $470 million of federal COVID-19 stimulus money to expand the program to 60,000 seats by 2023 — ostensibly making it universally available to all three-year-olds across the city. But the New York State Comptroller's Office projects a $376 million shortfall in 3-K funding by 2026 as one-time federal funding expires.

A FAMILY'S ON THE EDGE

Hernandez, 34, is concerned that this will mean her youngest son will not be able to receive the same childcare that his older brother did.

"Our socioeconomic situation is not possible if we don't have the assistance of universal 3-K," said Hernandez.

Hernandez is one of 375,000 parents citywide who left or reduced employment because of COVID-19 and lack of access to quality chilcare. After she contracted long-COVID in 2021, her family has relied on the income from Hernandez's husband, who is a maintenance worker at a hotel in Tribeca.

Hernandez's husband is the third generation in his family to live in an affordable housing complex in Tribeca, an otherwise wealthy area that parents flock to for its high-quality public schools.

"Unfortunately, we've been out-priced on everything. From after-school programs — just everything and anything you can imagine," Hernandez said. "[Private] daycare is just next to impossible because nannies probably make more than my husband makes on a yearly salary"

Mayor Adams' budget would also slash funding to all city agencies except for the New York Police Department, the Fire Department, and the Department of Sanitation, in order to curb a projected $10 billion deficit by 2026. The $711 million required for 3-K expansion as originally planned is a fraction of the $11.2 billion allocated for the NYPD — and $100 million less than what the city will pay this year in police overtime payments alone.

The City Council has vowed to fight the proposed cuts, which would disproportionately affect libraries and schools.

INCOME & WORK REQUIREMENTS

At all grade levels, school enrollment has dropped precipitously citywide. According to DOE data, the number of children enrolled in a 3-K program dropped by 8% between 2019 and 2022, leaving 16,432 seats unfilled. Likewise, the number of pre-K students dropped 13%, leaving 22,336 seats unfilled.

Despite the vacancies, some schools across the city have waitlists that are hundreds of students long. Over 1,500 students did not receive an offer for the 2022–2023 school year.

In a tweet, DOE Press Secretary Nathan Styer stated that the current programs are disproportionately reaching parents in high-resource areas, underscoring the department's shift away from universal programs toward programs catering to the city's poorest families.

"I think [the last administration's] goal was big, bold numbers," Schools Chancellor David Banks said to *The New York Times* in a September interview. "Our focus is not on a number. Our focus is on the quality."

The Adams administration has promised to improve outreach to families making less than 300 percent of the city's poverty level, who are eligible for childcare vouchers through the Administration for Children's Services. The administration has also taken steps to ensure that undocumented New Yorkers are eligible as well.

In the year since Mayor Adams took office, the number of families receiving these vouchers increased by 10,000 — but is still 14,000 vouchers lower than in 2019.

Gregory Brender, director of public policy for the Day Care Council of New York, is concerned that the shift away from universal care toward means-tested programs will only worsen disparities.

According to Brender, programs that have "income requirements and work requirements attached to it not only means that only those families who qualify can access the care, but it also presents a barrier because the process of determining that a family is eligible for care can take weeks or even months," Brender explained. "And it requires a lot of paperwork. It requires a lot of effort on the part of low-income families."

WHY THE EMPTY SEATS?

Ayanna Djata, 32, describes getting four children through the city's free childcare programs as a full-time job.

When her youngest two children were one and two years old, Djata won the housing lottery and moved from the Bronx to a new high rise in the Lower East Side.

"I wasn't familiar with the area, I didn't know the challenges that I was going to have to experience in terms of finding the children places to be," Djata said. "I had to call a lot of childcare providers — I was looking even all the way up to Harlem," nearly an hour's commute away.

She had to leave her full-time work as a bank teller for Wells Fargo in the process.

A PARENT'S WORK: *Ayanna Djata, 32, takes two of her four children home. She describes navigating the city's free childcare programs as a full-time job.*

Like Hernandez, Djata's son Noah was diagnosed with autism when he was three years old at a home daycare service provided by the city. His diagnosis was only the beginning of Djata's journey to get him the care that he needed.

In addition to providing the paperwork that established her eligibility for home-care vouchers, she also had to coordinate between pediatricians, medical insurers and teachers.

As a Black mom, Djata felt she had to be extra diligent in monitoring her children's educational experiences. Even after successfully enrolling her three youngest kids at free 3-K programs, she often felt teachers mistook her Black son's special needs for delinquent behavior in his majority-white classrooms.

The barrage of changes in the past year has only made the process more difficult, Djata explains, as she tries to enroll her one-year-old daughter in home-based care.

Between the 400 instructional coordinators and school social workers who were excessed without warning weeks before the first day of school in September — only to be reinstated months later — and the $400 million in delayed payments to daycare providers, the new administration has struggled to establish order.

"Policies change all the time and you have to be aware of that. You know, this new person in office, he did a lot of revamping in the early childhood education space. So if you have children, you have to figure out what did he do and how does that affect you," Djata said. "It's really, really tough."

RESOURCES FOR OUTREACH

For Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, an appointed member of the Manhattan Borough President's Panel for Educational Policy, failing to expand funding as originally planned will make it harder to reach parents struggling to navigate these changes.

"Not having the funding will be huge in terms of the seats that may be there, but more importantly, how are we going to get the child the services that they require?" said Salas-Ramirez. "How are we going to have the manpower necessary in order to provide those services?"

Last year, Melissa Martinez Uribe, 32, applied for her son to enroll in pre-K programs that would offer childcare through the end of her workday. As a salesperson at a gift shop, she doesn't return to the apartment she shares with her aunt and grandmother in Astoria, Queens, until 6 or 7 pm.

Uribe applied to numerous extended day programs in the area, but her son only got into a program that goes until 2:30 pm — hours before she gets off of work.

Though it wasn't her first choice, Uribe wants to keep her son in the program because she appreciates that classes are taught in Spanish, her native tongue, as well as English. But that doesn't look feasible.

"I'm like, what kind of job can I get? I have to be there at 2:30 to pick him up. Right in the middle [of the day]," Uribe said. "That's so hard as a single parent."

BLACK LOVE AS A HISTORICAL FORCE

FROM FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S EARLIEST MEMORIES TO TYRE NICHOLS'S FINAL WORDS, BLACK LOVE HAS TRANSFORMED AMERICAN HISTORY

By Nicholas Powers

DAVID HOLLENBACH

What shapes the world? Ideology? Religion? Nationalism? What if one of the most powerful forces in history flows right in front of our eyes and we don't see it?

Black Love. You taste it, kissing bae on the train before saying "bye". It makes you look through closing doors to get a last glimpse of her. You feel it in a hand slap, half-hug with your boyz. You see it in a girlfriend corn-rowing her girlfriend's hair on the stoop, eyes guiding fingers in a new pattern.

Black Love is everywhere. Tupac praised it as the "rose that grew from concrete". Black Love does more than survive. It defined our world as much as the Enlightenment or Democracy or Jesus. It is an unstoppable force that broke Western slavery, smashed segregation and apartheid, rewrote Islam and Christianity, rewrote the U.S. Constitution and now challenges the prison industrial complex.

Who knew that a kiss was stronger than a gun? If you look at history or art or just look at life, you'll see that love, the most natural instinct, becomes political when trapped by a system that chokes it for profit. Then love becomes dangerous. It saves us by destroying the world we believed could never change.

LEARNING TO READ

"I never saw my mother," Frederick Douglass wrote. "She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot…she would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone." The scene is from his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. When he was seven, she died and he felt as if was, "…the death of a stranger."

I taught it for years to students, in order to show how American slavery wrung money from flesh as plantations sold families. The follow-up was how Douglass freed himself through literacy. For the first time, I read it as a parent and put myself in his mother's shoes.

I knew what drove her. I felt the heart's hunger to smell the top of my baby's head. I knew the need to kiss your child's fingertips, to spoon them at night and wrap your warmth around them like a blanket. Like her, I palmed my son's chest to feel his pulse.

Douglass's mother is a minor character, flashing briefly in the pages before dying. But for me she was lit by a fantastic light. I imagined while she cradled him that a vast number of people, like her, snuck away from plantations. Parents, lovers and friends, tip-toed through the dewy night to see loved ones, whose smell and touch and face was worth risking death. How many jumped at a noise and then, a shadow stepped into a moonbeam. The one they hoped to see was here! How they embraced wildly. And wept. And held on.

Love drove them to risk life to reunite with who they lost. Love also drove them to reunite with their lost bodies.

I flipped pages in Douglass' autobiography to where he learned to express through words, his hunger to be free. He bought a book, *The Columbia Orator* and found anti-slavery arguments. He wrote, "It gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my soul that flashed through my mind but died away for want of utterance." Later he said literacy brought, "torment to sting my soul to unutterable anguish."

What he learned to read was his own body. Anguish came from being cut from his true self. His body was to him, what he was to his mother, someone deeply loved but missed.

Looking at the book shelf, the whole Black Literary Canon seemed upended. I was taught that literacy, specifically historical literacy, set us free. The iconic scene in Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave Narratives (books written after slavery) from Douglass to Malcolm X, Celie in *The Color Purple* to Precious in *Push* is where the protagonist struggles to mouth syllables and etch letters until by long hard work, they can read.

Touching the books, I realized what they read was the truth of a silenced body. Black love is a reunification with oneself, with the desire to move and think freely, with ancestors, with those living right now. Black Love rises from the past, sorrow too, and responsibility. It means to fully love we have to destroy the racism we internalized to get by, destroy the laws, governments and economies that profit from our imprisonment, our separation.

Now when I read Douglass's mother, traveling at night to find her son surrounded by plantations, filled with armed men, I know she's not alone. Time connects past to present. After she walks by, another mother calls for Emmett Till. A father and mother search for Sean Bell. More parents come looking for Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland and George Floyd. The small dirt path is filled with millions of families, searching for those they loved and lost to racism. Some seek the parts of themselves they hid. Some for a dream. Everyone, everyone is driven by love.

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT.

"Yo," I yelled at my son, "Get back here!" My kid and his friend, two trouble-making toddlers, ran to the Von King Park exit like escaped cons. Cars speed at the corner. Drivers don't look. I dropped the water bottle, ready to turbo-sprint when a brother saw what I saw, he scooped them up. I sighed. They tried to squirm but he had them locked.

"Yo thanks." I stared hard at them like what-the-hell-are-you-thinking. "Get to the playground. NOW." My son and his wingman sulked back to the jungle gym.

"All good." He gave me dap. "I got kids, they be trying to escape like Shawshank Redemption."

I laughed. "Just thinking the same thing." We re-enacted the Tim Robbins scene from the movie, arms up in the rain after he crawled through a shit-filled prison pipe to freedom. We fell out.

"Gonna be the death of me," he smiles, "These fucking kids."

Two dads. He from Section 8. Me, a professor down the block. Two men of color, united over fatherhood. Black Love fills Von King Park with its lawn, playgrounds and amphitheater. Here gentrifiers and hood parents, the Rasta soccer coach and Muslim moms, the hipsters and new divorcees, the daycare staff handing fluorescent jackets to the kids and the Mr. Softee ice-cream truck come together.

Magic happens. As toddlers squeal, play, fight over toys, splash in water – we feel love through them – their innocence rescues us. They pry us free from the classism, colorism, judgy mindset. We teach them to share, we buy everyone ice cream, watch out for each other. It's playground socialism. We can't help but want for other kids what we want for our own; safety, love, a real chance at life.

As kids played, nearby at the amphitheater, a Black church held a revival to a giant congregation. It was packed, standing room only. They swayed, hands up, palms splayed like tiny radar-dishes to receive divine energy. We caught the vapors.

In my pocket was the 1975 choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow was Enough* by Ntozake Shange. I was teaching it and at the end the women sang, "I found God in myself and loved her fiercely." My mom performed that play. I remembered how it transformed the Black and Puerto Rican cast, it gave them a voice, a vehicle for their needs. I was just a kid during her performances but I felt them recreate holiness.

Black Love's need to return to our bodies, ourselves transformed even God, white Jesus became Black Jesus, the master's Bible became Liberation Theology, or Rastafarianism or Martin Luther King's Soul Force. Black Love re-made Islam into the Nation of Islam; it re-shaped nationalism into Garveyism, socialism into the Black Panther Party. Black Love channeled the Civil Rights Movement into Black Lives Matters and finally, embraced gay and trans-Black people, and now, we're turning again to jails and the poverty that prepares us for jail, girding up to fight because even if it's too late for us, it's not for our kids.

Black Love is so strong, so connected to the very force of life, the very first cell in the primeval ocean, splitting and fighting to recreate itself, multiplying over millions of years into human bodies and human consciousness. Itself splits into thoughts upon thoughts, to live on the edge of space and time, that it tosses aside Gods and nations like toys.

Watching kids play with Hasbro figures, I think of Jesus saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for such is the kingdom of Heaven." Maybe Heaven comes when adults realize we can frolic with reality, break taboos for the sake of communion. And relearn how dangerous and beautiful love is.

Later, the man who scooped up my kid set up speakers and deep House music thumped the night. The shadows paint us shades of blue. The dads are buzzed. Moms too. Weed smoke curls from laughing half-moon eyes. "Follow Me" by Aly-Us hits and old heads drop so hard I can hear knee replacements, pop.

"I'm hoping to see the day, when my people can all relate," Aly-Us sang from speakers, "We must stop fighting to achieve the peace that was taught in our country, we shall all be free." Maybe it's the hopeful lyrics. Maybe it's 90's nostalgia. Maybe it's weed and drink. A late-night deep house party in Von King became something hood and sacred at the same time. We showed the kids our best moves and then the kids lead the way.

THE RETURN TO THE BODY

Black Love is a force that returns us to ourselves, through each other. Every generation rediscovers it and forgets it, or loses it in order to keep its temporary name. Integration. Upward Mobility. Getting that Bag. Nationalism. Jesus. Allah. Real Estate. Melanin Theory. Respectability politics.

It doesn't matter. Black Love is powered by life. It plucks those precious and throws them like litter. What remains is the return to the body in all its profane glory, all its scars like a language only we can read, all its weight only we can carry.

Black Love leading back to the body is a recurring scene, I now saw it in Malcolm X, James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni. In Assatta Shakur's 1987 autobiography she wrote, "My friend asked me why I don't wear my hair in an Afro …I always hated frying my hair…afraid my hair would go back. Back to where? The devil or Africa? To make it natural I cut it myself and then stood under the shower for hours melting the conk out. At last my hair was free."

When you flow with Black Love, you can't carry "isms", the colorism, the classism, the sexism with you. No way you enter into its deepest treasure with that. Why? Because Blackness is everything. It is gay and straight, trans and cis, poor and rich. It is big boned and slim. It looks like Akon. Looks like Alicia Keys. It speaks Spanish and Creole, English and Swahili. It is monogamous and poly, able bodied and disabled, patient and short-tempered, curious and cautious. It's kinky and nappy, wavy, soft and tender headed. It is anxious and secure. It's on the spectrum. It is genius and dumb. It is from the islands and the motherland, the hood and the Hamptons.

If you follow Black Love then your politics have to be one that creates a world where everyone can live with dignity.

The great intellectual gift of Black Love is that it is the Rosetta Stone to other movements. Seen through Black ventricles, the Gay Liberation Movement, Feminist waves and the worker's movement, especially Marxism, all return people from the hall of mirrors that is the scaffolding for a hierarchical society. Home is the body, the end of "alienation" where we own the means of producing material life and consciousness itself.

Here is the reward. Here is the end of history. In a kiss.

THE HEART IS THE SIZE OF A FIST

"Mama", George Floyd cried out. Officer Dereck Chauvin kneed his neck as bystanders begged him to let the man breathe. We all saw it. We marched to the edge of flipping the nation upside down.

Friends told me repeatedly that hearing him call to his mother sliced them like a razor. It just cut. It never healed.

Hearing a grown man cry out like a child hit home. We all became his family and marched to rescue his memory so even if he was dead, the lesson of his life lived on. Floyd was our brother, uncle, son and

Continued on page 13

SUE BRISK

DETERMINED: *Fired Twitter janitors rallied on Jan. 25 outside of the company's New York headquarters. The NYC workers are represented by SEIU 32BJ.*

CLEAN UP YOUR ACT

FIRED TWITTER JANITORS DENOUNCE COMPANY'S DIRTY LABOR PRACTICES

By Blake McMillan

On a cold, blustery afternoon marked by intermittent snow flurries, fired cleaning staff of Twitter rallied on Jan. 25 outside the company's W. 17th St. headquarters to protest their former employer.

Janitors from both Twitter's New York and San Francisco offices were present. "Who got the power?", the crowd shouted, "We got the power!"

Twitter has made headlines for a series of firings and re-hirings since Tesla CEO Elon Musk completed his purchase of the social-media platform in October for $44 billion. Musk is reported to have laid off around half of Twitter's 7,500-person staff. On Nov. 16, he warned that employees who remained at the company would have to be "extremely hardcore" and ready to work "long hours at high intensity."

"When I think about Twitter, I think about billionaires. And one in particular," said John Santos, secretary treasurer of 32BJ, the union that represents the New York City janitors. "They want to cut costs on the backs of the most vulnerable workers."

Fired janitors spoke to the crowd. Marina Gashi explained her experience working at Twitter through the pandemic only to be dismissed with nothing more than a text message. Holding back tears, she said that her job provided for her four children and 91-year-old father.

"I will be thousands of dollars in debt because of my medication bills," said Gashi.

Laureta Gjoni, a single mom with two children, told *The Indypendent* that she joined Twitter as a cleaner in 2015 when the office opened. She was fired days before Christmas. "We were working on a Monday night, the 19th, when we got the message, 'Don't come into work.' " The group finished cleaning and left. She's been unemployed since.

Gjoni said that she helped clean during the construction of the building. "I know the whole building, top to bottom. I was pregnant with my first baby, and I cleaned it. No one can clean it better than us."

Since the cleaners were fired, there have been reports of Twitter employees having to bring their own toilet paper to work. And they may have to continue to be "hardcore" about that.

Under New York City law, most building service workers can't be replaced without cause. A union spokesperson told *The Indy* that 32BJ has yet to verify that any cleaning is taking place within the building. But he added, "if we get proof of that, legal action could be taken."

TWITTER/TIFFANY_CABAN

WORKERS' RIGHTS: *Socialist City Councilmember Tiffany Cabán speaks at a Jan. 23 rally for the Secure Jobs NYC Act, which would forbid employee firings without "good cause."*

LABOR BRIEFS

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

UNIONS GAIN MEMBERS, BUT SHARE HITS RECORD LOW

U.S. labor unions gained 273,000 members in 2022, but their share of the workforce fell to 10.1%, according to figures released Jan. 19 by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. The union-density rate, down from 10.3% in 2021, was the lowest since the bureau started tracking it in 1983. While unions' successes in organizing places like Starbucks coffee shops have attracted much attention, the number of new members gained was far less than the 5.3 million increase in the workforce. There were 14.3 million union members last year, down from 17.7 million in 1983, when 20.1% of workers were union. Now, about one-third of public-sector workers such as teachers and firefighters are members, but only 6% of private-sector workers are. The number of petitions for union representation filed with the National Labor Relations Board in a nine-month period of 2021-22 increased 58% over the previous year, but many union-busting practices are either legal or go unpunished.

CABÁN LAUNCHES CAMPAIGN FOR CITY JUST-CAUSE FIRING LAW

City Councilmember Tiffany Cabán announced a campaign on January 23 to pass the Secure Jobs Act, a bill that would prohibiting employers from firing workers without "just cause." "Most working NYers are forced to live under the constant threat of being fired for any reason, or no reason at all, with no warning, no explanation, and no recourse," Cabán stated on Twitter. The measure, introduced in the Council in December, would expand the city's 2020 law prohibiting fast-food employers from firing workers without "just cause" or "a bona fide economic reason" to cover all employees. Cabán said it would require employers to give workers advance warning that they might get fired, a written explanation of the reasons why, and an opportunity to appeal the decision. However, so far only nine of the Council's 51 members have signed on as sponsors. Restaurant trade groups are challenging the fast-food just-cause law in federal court, appealing a judge's dismissal of their lawsuit last year.

WORKERS SEEK FIRST UNION AT EBAY COMPANY

Workers at TCGPlayer, a Syracuse-based online marketplace for trading-card games recently acquired by eBay, filed a petition for union representation Jan. 25 with the National Labor Relations Board. If they win the election, they will have formed the first union at eBay, the Communications Workers of America said. The union would include more than 260 workers at TCGPlayer's authentication center, which processes cards being sold for games such as Magic: The Gathering, Pokémon, and Yu-Gi-Oh! eBay paid $295 million for the fast-growing company last October. "The eBay acquisition was a fire under a lot of people," inventory specialist Lindsey Gancasz told the Polygon gaming-news Website. "We want to ensure that what makes it a good place to work continues to stay that way." eBay said it was proud to have built a company culture "without union representation."

IOWA FOOD WORKERS WIN BIG VICTORY AFTER 6-MONTH STRIKE

Workers at an Iowa industrial-starch plant overwhelmingly ratified a new contract Jan. 22, ending a 175-day strike. More than 120 workers at Ingredion in Cedar Rapids walked out last August after management demanded that they pay higher health-insurance premiums, switch to working 12-hour days, and be on call on all their days off with no compensation, according to workers. The four-year deal will raise wages by 15% and maintain benefits and work rules, Mike Moore, president of Local 100G of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco, and Grain Millers Union, told KCRG-TV. The strike was important, worker Luke Gronewold told More Perfect Union, because when union contracts at other companies in the city expire, "whatever it is that happens here can happen there. So if we don't stand up to basically corporate greed, then we're just setting those companies up to do the same thing to their employees."

INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

LULA CRACKS DOWN ON COUP PLOTTERS IN BRAZIL

More than 1,500 people have been arrested on charges of participating in the Jan. 8 attack on Brazil's presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court buildings in an attempt to overthrow President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and restore Jair Bolsonaro, who lost to Lula in the October elections. Bolsonaro, whose governing style and policies resembled Donald Trump's, had made similarly bogus charges of election fraud. The arrests, unlike those in the United States after Trump supporters invaded Congress in January 2021, went beyond members of the mob. Anderson Torres, head of security in the capital of Brasilia, faces charges of sabotaging the protection of the buildings, and police said they found plans in his home for a scheme to void the election results. Federal District Governor Ibaneis Rocha was suspended from office and is under investigation. Lula, saying he believes the mob had inside help getting into the buildings unmolested, also fired the head of the Brazilian army, more than 40 federal police officials and more than 50 soldiers in his security detail. Bolsonaro, who went to Florida Dec. 30, is also under investigation.

U.S. TO PROSECUTE FOUR IN ASSASSINATION OF HAITIAN PRESIDENT

Four men accused in the July 2021 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise will be prosecuted in the United States, the Justice Department announced Jan. 31. Two Haitian Americans, James Solages and former DEA agent Joseph Vincent, and Colombian soldier Germán Rivera Garcia are charged with conspiring to commit murder or kidnapping outside the United States, while Christian Emmanuel Sanon was charged with smuggling bulletproof vests. Three other men, including former Haitian senator Joseph Joel John, were indicted in the United States last year. Haitian law enforcement suspects Sanon, a Florida-based pastor and unsuccessful businessman, was the mastermind of the plot. Other suspects, including about 20 former Colombian soldiers, are in custody in Haiti. Prosecution there has stalled, as several judges have resigned or been dismissed, the country no longer has a functioning government and gangs control much of Port-au-Prince, the capital.

PERU PROTESTS CONTINUE

THIS IS HOW YOU DO IT: *Brazilian President Lula da Silva has fired top military and police commanders who aided a right-wing coup against his government.*

Highway-blocking protests demanding the release of ousted leftist president Pedro Castillo, the resignation of President Dina Boluarte and new elections are continuing in Peru despite violent suppression. Castillo, a former teacher and union leader, was arrested Dec. 7 after he tried to dissolve Congress to forestall an impeachment attempt. The protests, initially concentrated in rural and indigenous areas, have spread to the big cities of Lima and Cusco. "It's as if we aren't humans," Raúl Constantino Samillán Sanga, whose brother was one of 17 people killed by police in the southern city of Juliaca on Jan. 9, told the The Guardian. "The whole of the Andes is now saying we've had enough — this must change." On Feb. 1, Congress rejected a proposal to move the next elections up from 2026 to this December.

PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONFLICT ERUPTS AGAIN UNDER NEW FAR-RIGHT GOVERNMENT

Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians flared up again after Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu regained power by forming a coalition with extreme religious-nationalist parties. At least 32 Palestinians have been killed by Israeili forces since the start of the new year; on Jan. 26, 10 Palestinians, including two children, were killed on Jan. 26 during a raid on the Jenin refugee camp. The next day, a 21-year-old Palestinian shot seven Israelis to death as they were leaving a synagogue in an East Jerusalem settlement; he was later killed by police. Netanyahu, who took office Dec. 29, named Itamar Ben Gvir, a former member of the Kach terrorist group, which advocated expelling Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories, as national security minister — in charge of police. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, head of the Religious Zionist party, is a West Bank settler. He, Ben Gvir and Netanyahu all support Israel annexing settlements, which would effectively destroy any chance for an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank.

MIGRANTS

Continued from page 6

time work in the area and feared conditions at the distant Red Hook terminal. They demanded the City provide a more suitable place to relocate to. Small groups of supporters and cops were constants at the scene. Nearby, the most expensive apartments in the city overlook Central Park, and homeless people sleep on the steps of the 57th St. N-Q-R-W station.

After seeing first-hand the conditions at the Red Hook facility, some of the men traveled back to The Watson to join the encampment. The protesters' demands were: a bed, a place they can safely leave their belongings, bathroom and shower access, heat and work permits.

"We are all very conscious of what we're doing," said Ivan, an asylum-seeker from Venezuela. "We just want a dignified place to sleep."

On the night of Feb. 1, just before *The Indypendent* went to press, the encampment was dismantled. The NYPD's Strategic Response Group, a battalion tasked with the dual mission of responding to terrorist attacks and handling protests, moved in on the encampment. Migrants and supporters grabbed the supplies they could and left the scene. The cops indiscriminately cut the chains off and impounded all the bikes locked up around the hotel. The whereabouts of the protesting migrants were not immediately known. Follow @TheIndypendent for further developments.

BLACK LOVE

Continued from page 11

nephew. Black Love grew exponentially, enlarging us through each other and it returned a vision of our power in the burning police stations and street-shaking protests.

Black Love destroys what is in the way. One heart is roughly the size of a fist. Think of the marches and the countless fists in the air, each a heart ready to explode.

"Mama" Tyre Nichols yelled as police struck him so hard that he died. She stood at home, a hundred yards away. The path between them is centuries long and worn down by millions of feet.

The protests calling for justice for Tyre gather force. Again, we follow Douglass' mother, who walked through the night to protect her child. I know what I'm about to say is speculation. He did not write it but in the way, you just know that you know, I am sure, some nights Douglass went to the door and called for her.

"Mom?"

Think of who you kiss. Who do you hug fiercely? Our children call to us here and now for help. Look into their eyes and you can hear them calling from the future. In their time, the Earth will become hot, droughts will kill crops, cities battered by storms and people will die in slums as floods sweep them away. Black faces in high places won't help. They'll be paid off by the rich with exclusive homes in safe zones.

"Dad?"

Right now, we have to lift them and say, "I love you." And that means loving the world that makes their lives possible.

If we succeed, if we do this, if we fight to live, if we practice Black Love, years from now they'll wake up and look around. They'll see the new world we built. The stronger democracy, the end of poverty, the abolition of prisons, the return to our bodies enshrined in rights.

They'll feel us in everything they touch. They'll know we came in the darkest night. And they'll know every sunrise, we stayed.

WHY THE POLICE USE SO MANY CONFIDENTIAL INFORMANTS

Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice, SECOND EDITION
BY ALEXANDRA NATAPOFF, FOREWORD BY BARRY SCHECK
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, NOVEMBER 2022, 288 PAGES

By Eleanor Bader

According to Harvard law professor Alexandra Natapoff, the leading cause of wrongful capital conviction in the United States is dependence on jailhouse snitches who lie for personal gain.

This is not a new finding. In fact, since DNA evidence became available in the 1990s, the criminal (in)justice system has been repeatedly rocked by the consequences of reliance on eyewitnesses, confidential informants and community-based or jailhouse snitches who've fabricated evidence, misstated facts, or exaggerated or minimized details to save their own skin.

Barry Scheck, co-founder of Innocence Project, lays out the terrain for this in his foreword to the second edition of Natapoff's *Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice*. "Informant deals are a secretive, high-risk kind of plea deal in which the government gambles on information obtained from unreliable sources in exchange for giving these sources leniency, money or other benefits," he writes.

The consequences of these deals are, of course, enormous, and Natapoff's research — now available in an expanded and updated version of her groundbreaking 2009 text of the same name — is a stunning chronicle of justice denied.

JEFF GRIETCHEN

SHADOW WORLD: *Alexandra Natapoff, author of* Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice.

First, some context. Snitching has long been relied upon by law enforcement agencies, from the neighborhood police squad to the ATF, DEA and FBI, and informants have been used to get all kinds of information. As has been well documented, police have installed informants, many of them later identified as agent provocateurs, in mosques and political groups as a way to derail potential violence and "terrorism." But snitching extends much further than this, with the majority of tipsters providing data about street-level drug deals and a small percentage reporting about white-collar crime, political corruption, corporate malfeasance or Mafia activity.

Natapoff distinguishes this from whistle-blowing, since, in snitching cases, informants do not come forward voluntarily; instead, they are lured to "cooperate" by a promise of some sort, typically dropped charges or sentencing leniency after an arrest for illegal activity. At times, money, drugs or sex have also been provided.

But here's where it goes completely off the rails: "As the law currently stands," Natapoff writes, "there is no crime for which punishment cannot be mitigated through cooperation, from speeding to murder, and no type of case in which informants cannot be used." Even more shocking is the ubiquity of the practice. While the exact number of "confidential informants" remains a mystery, Natapoff estimates that as many as 4% of young Black men in urban centers are actively cooperating with police at any given time.

What's more, she continues, "20% of all federal offenders and 45% of federal drug defendants cooperate in some way." Even more shocking, these numbers do not include the approximately 30,000 "confidential informants" who currently work for the FBI and DEA.

Natapoff reports that these arrangements typically operate in an ad-hoc, under-the-radar fashion, a reality that is underscored by the fact that around 95% of criminal cases are settled before trial. This shields those involved from public scrutiny and has serious implications for people living in over-policed and informant-heavy communities. The predictable upshots are false accusations, erroneous raids and, ultimately, the wrongful conviction of innocent people.

Needless to say, this exacerbates longstanding racial and class animus.

And, at least as far as the "war on drugs" is concerned, it's also pointless. As Natapoff writes, "When police use criminal snitches to bust a mid-level drug-dealer or shut down a drug house, new dealers and houses spring up to take their place. This means that even as the harms associated with informants persist, any benefits of their deployment may quickly dissipate."

That said, *Snitching* does not advocate eliminating the police, ending drug prosecutions or supporting prison abolition. Instead, the book outlines a series of reforms to make the practice less opaque.

"The key to regulating the informant market is to reject the culture of secrecy and impunity that generates so many of its harmful consequences and to insist on principled legal limits to the ways in which the state can deploy the informant deal," she concludes. As a starting point, she supports requiring police to keep accurate records about informants, with a detailed chronicle of their activities and the tradeoffs involved. She also wants limits on which crimes can be forgiven and which violators can be approached. "Very minor crimes should not open the door to the risks of the informant deal," she writes. "Legislators should prohibit police from pressuring traffic offenders into becoming drug informants."

Furthermore, Natapoff wants law enforcement to stop looking the other way when snitches commit assault, battery or rape. She also wants them to be barred from threatening vulnerable populations — undocumented people, children, the mentally disabled and transgender individuals among them — with deportation or arrest if they fail to cooperate.

They're good suggestions, and, while they do not go far enough to upend our racist, sexist, classist and homophobic system of injustice, they're a start.

Natapoff, I suspect, would agree on the need for wider change. "Short of the military, our criminal system is the most coercive, violent arm of the democratic state," she writes. "It possesses extraordinary powers, including the authority to search our homes, our bodies, and our email; to stop us on the street and in our cars; to lock us up; and even to shoot at us."

We, however, also have power, and at the very least, can support efforts to end the flagrant human-rights violations that have been allowed to flourish in our communities.

HOLLYWOOD & BLACK DIRECTORS

By Peter Carellini

The largest film budget ever secured by an African-American director went to Ryan Coogler in 2018 to helm *Black Panther*, the 22nd entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While the movie was met with the expected torrent of racism from usual suspects such as FOX News pundits and some older comic-book fans, it went on to gross $1.3 billion, receiving rave reviews and a whopping seven Oscar nominations. It was celebrated everywhere for its epic representation of the African diaspora, unapologetically so, with all but one lead role played by an actor of African descent.

But something insidious brewed from this success: The big studios, spurred on by the Disney regime, saw African-American screen presence and direction as profitable in a way they hadn't yet fully exploited. They'd found a means to deflect criticism, more a useful tool to deny naysayers and trolls than a way to do any meaningful uplifting. What should have been an influx of talent behind and in front of the camera led to a new kind of status quo: the most wealthy and powerful filmmaking companies donning a veneer of progressiveness.

This is not the case for smaller films, like Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016); Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), which depicts the betrayal of Fred Hampton; or the extraordinary portfolio of Jordan Peele. That is the kind of subversive, unyielding work we need more of. I am discussing the tactics of Disney, of Amazon, of Warner Brothers, Apple, and Sony, and how they use surface-level leaps to mask the lack of true racial progress.

One of those hidden tactics is how Hollywood absorbs Black talent. When Joe Talbot's ethereal, idiosyncratic *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* came out in 2019, lead actor Jonathan Majors was rewarded by being thrown into the Marvel machine. Barry Jenkins broke ground with his Academy Award-winning indie film, *Moonlight*, in 2016. His follow-up, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, released in 2018, was an uncompromising adaptation of James Baldwin's 1974 novel. Now, Disney has Jenkins, a singular talent, directing a prequel to their 2019 retelling of *The Lion King*.

Nia DaCosta (*Little Woods*, 2018) was tapped to remake *Candyman*. Pioneers like Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991) and Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*, 1997) can barely find funding, while white-guilt dreck like *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly, 2018) is still being bankrolled. Works like Boots Riley's surrealist, comedic critique of capitalism, *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), seem like triumphant anomalies.

This has stalled the progress of Black filmmakers and actors, putting a cap on the stories they can tell, while continuing not to grant them the resources that would give them parity with their white costars. Black filmmakers are not encouraged to build legacies of their own. Rather, they are harnessed to established properties that appeal to the broadest possible audience, leaving us all worse off.

Do you think Disney, which accepts Pentagon funding for its largest brand, would ever give Spike Lee the money to create another screed of righteous anger? What started as an exciting alternative ecosystem has been largely assimilated into the great, military-loving, big-business machine. Watching Ryan Coogler forced to buddy his African monarch with the CIA against a radical revolutionary in *Black Panther II* (2022) is no substitute.

Black Panther II is an example of the kind of "representation" that the majority audience is comfortable with. When was the last time you saw a major film with Black characters who have bodies out of the norm, are political radicals, or are allowed to be ugly, loud, or cruel? It is packaged, so to speak, in figures like Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 2023), the dignified and emotionless supporting characters in recent Harry Potter films, and comic-book properties already well worn. What is uplifting about Black talent being sucked into the intellectual-property machine?

The chances are diminishing that we will be exposed to the oeuvres of the next Sun Ra (*Space is the Place*, 1974); the next Kathleen Collins (*Losing Ground*, 1982); or the next Melvin Van Peebles, who after the success of his 1971 *Watermelon Man*, turned down a three-picture Columbia contract, instead developing the independent film Sweet *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. This encompasses everyone. No culture is getting the chance to depict subversion.

FORGOTTEN BLACK FILMMAKERS

The 1910s and 1920s were no more accepting towards Black filmmakers, but those like Oscar Micheux, Richard D. Maurice, and Spencer Williams banded together against a system they knew would never accept them until either money or public pressure forced its hand. Their work is largely forgotten (none of the big studios have shown interest in preserving it), but revolutionarily, they funded their own films, produced them, and were able to distribute them when civil rights were still 40 years away. They discussed race and the subtleties of prejudice in a biting fashion in an era when *Birth of a Nation* and later *Gone With the Wind* were doing the precise opposite.

Even as late as the mid-1990s, Black female directors were carving out their own slice of the independent film scene. This gave them a niche where they had a modicum of control, but it faded as franchise fare took over in the 21st century.

We should not be applauding leading actors or filmmakers for being given the 20th installment in a superhero franchise, or voice-leading something like Disney's *Strange World* (2022) that is doomed to flop. Nor, when a TV show written by white writers includes buzzwords simply to anger conservatives — *She-Hulk* is one of the worst examples of this — should we think that is anything other than the cinematic equivalent of Nancy Pelosi taking a knee for George Floyd before tossing police bundles of money.

With exceptions like the ABC-TV series *Abbott Elementary*, set in an underfunded predominantly Black school in Philadelphia, these efforts at discussing race largely remain a polished, homogenized, digestible version, scrubbing away nuance and complexity in favor of a cozy back-pat. The characters are squeaky-clean, reduced to markers of enlightenment for liberals who would clutch their purses if they ever set foot in the hood.

The creators of these films are patting themselves on the back for doing what other artists have been doing for nearly a century, while boxing out any new wave resembling that historic path-carving. This reiterates that the only representation of Black people on mass-market screens will be whatever is deemed profitable, and to hell with any angry, progressive, filmmakers who threaten the status quo.

RADICAL VISION: *Cassius "Cash" Green (LaKeith Stanfield) and his girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson) in* Sorry to Bother You *(2018), a surrealist satire of workplace alienation and capitalist greed directed by Boots Riley.*

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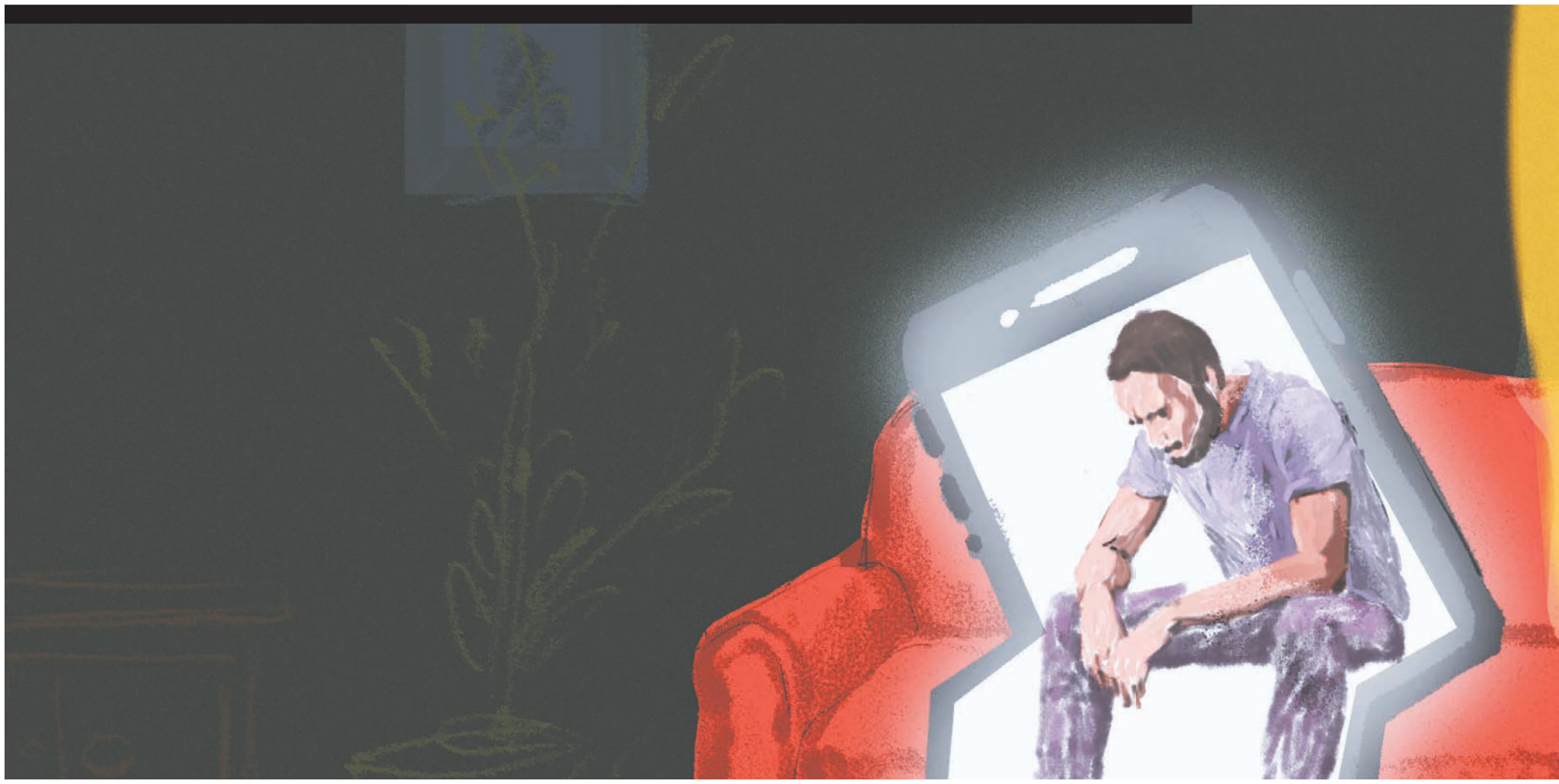

DON'T READ THIS ARTICLE ON YOUR PHONE

By Ben Mankoff

Upon acquiring an iPhone in 2017, I kept it close at all times, rarely letting a slow moment pass without popping in headphones and mainlining podcasts, or checking my email, or checking the news, or checking a recipe I'd made 100 times — checking, checking, checking. Sticking headphones in my ears and cueing up a new podcast before cooking dinner, I would say to my wife, "I'm going into phone land, if you need me just text and Siri will read it to me." I removed myself at nearly every opportunity from the sensory world I share with my most beloved beings. My wife couldn't say my name and conjure me through the air; only through Apple's proprietary medium could she reach me. The cat would chirp for treats and I, oblivious to her presence, would step on her paw as she approached coyly from behind, letting out a shriek that barely penetrated my awareness as I distractedly spun around the kitchen.

How did I get here? How did we?

In his pathbreaking work of ecological philosophy, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), David Abram uses the history of literacy to show how technological progress has come at the cost of intimate relationships between humans and what Abram calls the "more-than-human" world. While we may think much in our lives isn't human, there is a persistent human frame around pets, lawns, showers and food from the grocery store. As members of a modern technological society we so rarely have contact with any kind of radical otherness — wild animals, old-growth forests, riverbanks — that as individuals and as communities, we have lost the ability to engage in intimate discourse with the beyond-human world around us. This lies at the heart of our ecological crises and, according to Abram, it was the technology of literacy that set us on such a course.

Why literacy? Abram's thesis is that with the development of writing around 3,500 years ago, oral cultures that had previously co-created meaning with their ecosystems via sensory perception began to fix meaning into text, a tool that would evolve to have no connection to that ecosystem and only narrowly to the senses. Pictographs representing specific objects or acts gave way to phonetic alphabets that could be rearranged and combined to create entirely new meanings, words and worlds that could exist separately from the more-than-human. The very process an individual undergoes in the course of becoming literate engenders a reflexiveness, a self-reflection, which in turn produces an intuition that the mind and the sensing body are separate.

"The literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal experience," writes Abram.

The reflexive self, the self of the inward-facing mirrors, existed before literacy. Human beings were capable of self-possession long before the alphabet. But the reflective power of that mirror grew when we began to read, so much so that our vision was overwhelmed by ourselves, and our selves became subjects of intense interest. Nature progressively faded from view and we could see ourselves as part of a new global identity: humanity. Digital information technologies such as the smartphone threaten to eclipse our view of even that human identity, so that the only things we can care for are our individual selves.

But there is another way to be, and it starts with the air you are breathing now. Since the first green algae on a sea-sprayed rock metabolized carbon dioxide and released oxygen, giving birth to aerobic life, air has been the network that connects the beings that fill the landscapes of the earth. For the oral and indigenous cultures Abram examines, air, wind, and breath constitute a network in which every earthly being participates, not just human beings. He writes that "the ineffability of the air seems akin to the ineffability of awareness itself, and we should not be surprised that many indigenous peoples construe awareness, or 'mind,' not as a power that resides inside their heads, but rather as a quality that they themselves are inside of, along with the other animals and the plants, the mountains and the clouds." With the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, the literate self began to think of mind — psyche, from a Greek word for breath — as something encased within an individual body, rather than something in which an individual body participates.

With the forgetting of air inaugurated in ancient times by literacy, we began to lose an understanding of ourselves as parts of an enveloping earth full of animate beings all breathing the same air, all sharing, in some sense, the same mind. And with the utter replacement of air with media as the medium through which meaning flows into and out of us, a replacement under way and gaining speed: We are losing even the understanding of ourselves, that literacy introduced, as beings which are part of an enveloping humanity.

• • •

The presence of the smartphone, almost exclusively a media-delivery tool, insists through its notifications and its design. The "ping" is an immediate relief from my own thoughts, always occluding the possibility of absence, of the mystery of otherness, of anything but a spectral, unattentive version of myself and the phone's content. There is no space for air in a smartphone, a solid block of glass and metal, perceivable to us only as a heavy, full density through which nothing could or should ever flow. A breeze can't flutter the pages of your Kindle to remind you that you are surrounded by earthly, beyond-human power.

Our senses, which attune us to the world, are overwhelmed and under-used, made both raw and numb by their constant exposure to self-reflective technological media. The more time we spend with the black mirror of digital media, the less coherence we have as individuals because our individuality is made up of our interactions with that which is other than ourselves. The black mirror has only ourselves to show us.

A student volunteer in the library where I work recently talked to me about their latest hobby: taking photos with a point-and-shoot camera, the kind I used when I was their age, the kind without an instant means to share the photos once taken.

The New York Times reported on the trend of teenagers using older digital cameras, in part for the nostalgic effect it produces. But I argue that the appeal goes beyond nostalgia. Disaggregating the functions of the smartphone, putting air between the creation of the image and its being shared, even having to put down the camera and walk to a computer and plug in the media card to begin editing and sharing, opens space for the world outside to intrude on our thoughts and feelings, for the slant of the sun through the window and the song of the bird in the tree to affect the way we see the photos we've taken, to re-establish the link between our sensory experience and our interior experience.

ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

Young people face a future of work and culture and politics that will demand they participate in the digital economy at the expense of their well-being, demand that they pay rent to Apple or Google in order not only to access their photographs but to function as a member of a society. Some kids feel this and respond by finding ways to reopen themselves to the world, make themselves vulnerable to its nourishing intrusions and to re-introduce air into their lives.

• • •

What's going to happen to us now that hundreds of millions of people live most of their days enveloped in the digital world? Abram helps us see what a paradigm shift in knowledge technologies has wrought, and what it might still write. If the next step for digital technologies is a metaverse generated largely by AIs for the sake of colonization and extraction by corporations, how will this further deteriorate our care for the beyond-human world, our prospects of averting ecological disaster? It seems obvious that we might finally and completely lose not only our awareness of and care for nature, but our connection to other human beings.

With no air, is it any wonder that we are suffocating on our selves? That we are losing social unity and psychological coherence in this suffocation? That the political reality of most Americans has wrapped itself around the pillars of identity and information, the very contours our technologies define? Ultimately we must go beyond individual acts of refusal such as mine and work for social changes at an institutional level.

The story we have allowed the ruling class to sell us is: Give people the technology to enlighten themselves [to light up their self] and democracy will flourish. Technology is the means of human progress. This is partially correct, for what technologies in areas as different as agriculture and literacy share is that they put once-communal powers into individual hands. They "empower" individuals within, but also over communities. When a society takes up a radical new information technology, it is elite individuals who often draw the greatest benefit, while the rest are left to defend our communities and ecosystems from the technology's fracturing effects.

The dramatic "democratization" of media technology in recent decades hasn't resulted in the flourishing of democratic institutions. It has tuned up political divisions and acclimated millions to the idea that online activism and participation or representation in mass media are suitable replacements for community — while simultaneously numbing our senses with a torrent of content, declawing the populace.

Communal institutions that connect us to the enveloping earth must be strengthened, reinforced, perhaps remade, in the face of individualizing technology if we hope to prevent ecological catastrophe. Rather than pump more atomizing, geographically agnostic information technologies into our cultures, we must reinvest in local, communal forms of knowledge production. Public libraries are particularly well-suited to serve these democratic functions, given their historical role as maintainers of communal knowledge, their highly local nature and their popular support as trusted institutions.

A healthy relationship with digital technologies may not be impossible, but it is readily apparent that we do not have such a relationship now. Now, we pollute and mine and exploit the earth so that Google can turn our lights off for us at bedtime. This calls for acts of civil disobedience, and I don't know where else to start except to say, with Bartleby the scrivener, "I prefer not to." If that reference is obscure, I have a solution: go ask your public librarian.

THE MORE TIME WE SPEND WITH DIGITAL MEDIA, THE LESS COHERENCE WE HAVE AS INDIVIDUALS. I SHOULD KNOW.

• • •

On a social scale, solving ecological and psychological crises means first solving our politics, our collective means of getting things done. On a personal scale it means first changing the way we get things done. So I am giving up my smartphone. It is an act of refusal, first and foremost. I refuse to behave any longer as though I cannot think without my smartphone, as though I can't sustain relationships without my smartphone, as though I can't have a healthy body without my smartphone, as though I can't participate in community, storytelling, activism or leisure that isn't mediated by Apple or Google.

Although it causes headaches for myself, my family and the editor of this essay among others, I have found that there is nothing I can't do without my smartphone except tune out the outside world. Without a smartphone, no longer can I spend my time with headphones pouring podcasts into my ears, muting out my own thoughts as well as the delightful intrusions of the earth.

I make dinner to the sounds of the garlic frying, I notice the cat slinking into the kitchen to beg for a bit of cheese, I'm attuned to the sounds of my wife turning the pages of a book on the couch, and I feel more at rest within myself, more at home among these others than harried and agitated and concerned by the paucity of otherness that envelops me in Phone Land. Last night I saw lightning and heard thunder, and I could distinguish them from flashing headlights and the M train rolling by. For a moment, even in this city, I was relieved of the crush of humanity.

WHY I WROTE A BOOK ABOUT MY PET PARROT

By Michael Smith

Why did I write about living with a bird for 30 years? Usually I write about things left-wing, like law and politics. But last August OR Books came out with *Parrot Tales: Our Life With a Magical Bird,* which I co-wrote with my wife Debby. But it's not such a departure after all and herein lies the tale, so to speak.

It all started in 1992 on Sunday morning when Debby and I took our 10-year-old son Eli for a visit to a pet shop in Tribeca called The Urban Bird.

The owner sold only baby parrots. All kinds. All colors, from all over the world. Except they were hatched here in the United States as mandated by law.

When we walked in, the birds in the store were young, with one exception. An older bird was living in a cage, hanging from the ceiling in the back of the store, commanding a view of all who entered. He was evidently not a happy bird. He had been abandoned when the couple who owned him split up. He spotted us and yelled out, "I've got a yeast infection!"

"What?" said Eli, looking up first at the bird and then at me. Before I could answer, the bird shouted, "Fuck you!" That was it. We decided then and there to buy a baby bird. We still have him. We called him Charlie Parker after the great saxophone player whose nickname was "Bird."

Charlie is a sentient creature with intentional speech. He's not a tape recorder or a mimic. We have a relationship.

Charlie used to say "Let's order out" when he was hungry. Now he says "want some chicken," chicken meaning any kind of food. When he is sleepy at night he says "wanna go sleep." He follows up with "sweep the floor," "cover my cage," and finally "good night."

We lost our downtown law office due to toxic pollution after 9/11 and had to practice out of our living room where Charlie lives in his cage. Debby was on the telephone with an aggressive insurance adjuster. Charlie could hear him. Charlie loves Debby and is very protective. Charlie got more and more agitated listening to the abuse of the aggressive insurance adjuster. He was walking back-and-forth on his perch. Finally he could not stand it any longer and yelled out, in my tone of voice, "I am going to kick your ass you son-of-a-bitch!

"What?" said the guy. Debby hung up on him.

The stories we tell are laugh-out-loud funny. But that's not all the book is about. The James Webb Space Telescope has so far revealed 4,000 planets much like ours circling around suns. This is likely the basis of extraterrestrial intelligent life. It will not be human. Communicating with Charlie is an example of what it might be like when there's contact between the creatures of Earth and those of distant planets in outer space.

Astrophysicist Carl Sagan speculated on what kind of brain intelligent creatures who could think would have. It could be something like Charlie's. No cerebral cortex. But packed with neurons. Humans and parrots split from each other evolutionarily some 300 million years ago.

Charlie weighs about a pound and his brain is the size of a shelled walnut. He is an African grey parrot whose ancestors came from the Congo. Charlie was laid in Miami and hatched in New York.

BRIAN GELTNER

BIRD IS THE WORD: *Michael and Debby Smith with their pet parrot Charlie Parker.*

The most famous African grey was Alex, an acronym for avian life experiment. Alex worked in a laboratory at Harvard with pioneer scientist Dr. Irene Pepperberg. Her groundbreaking studies proved that African grey parrots have the intelligence of a seven-year-old and the emotional development of a two-year-old.

She demonstrated that Alex had the capacity for abstract thought, knew the concepts of bigger and smaller, knew the concept of none, could add and subtract up to seven, knew colors and shapes, and had feelings and emotions. The evening before he died, as Irene was leaving the lab, Alex said, "I love you."

When Dr. Pepperberg started her studies 45 years ago she was ridiculed by nearly the entire all-male scientific establishment. She could not get grants or a position in the university. Her husband supported her for a dozen years, finally telling her he thought she was "a failure" and she should get a job teaching high school science. They divorced. She is now world renowned. Her book *The Alex Studies* is sold at the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Parrots live on six continents. They are being obliterated due to poaching, habitat loss and climate change. Devastation is being visited upon much of Central Africa where greys come from. They are victims of limitless greed and desperation. The economic whip drives poachers in Nigeria. A wild African grey can bring hundreds of dollars.

In Australia, wildfires brought a fiery end to 2019. Scientists estimated that over half a billion creatures were killed, including many Australian magpies. As the fires tore through the countryside, the magpies (who belong to the same family of highly intelligent birds as parrots, crows and ravens) were heard pitifully making the sound of rescue vehicles, but to no avail.

Their habitat went up in flames so powerful that the inferno could be seen from space. Humans have induced rapid global heating and we face a threat of mass extinction of species not seen since the end of the Cretaceous period 66 million years ago. At this critical time, we are belatedly becoming more intentionally aware of our commonality and interconnectedness with other beings and with nature.

Humans since Aristotle have placed themselves on top of the animal hierarchy and apart from nature. We thought we were different and superior. This false belief has philosophical and ethical implications. After 30 years of living with an African grey parrot, and especially living with him over the last three being isolated by COVID, I better understand the interconnectedness of species and our part as stewards of nature.

Michael Smith is the author or co-editor of seven books including Lawyers for the Left and Imagine: Living in a Socialist USA. *He is a co-host of* Law and Disorder Radio, *which airs Mondays at 11 am on WBAI-99.5 FM.*

REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Reverend Billy,
I am protected by my white-skin privilege. Still, I feel enraged by the endless videos of police killing unarmed Black people. When does this end?

— ASHLEY

P.S. I marched many times for Black Lives Matter, but nothing seems to be working.

Ashley — the way you're talking … You package racism like it's a product with a shelf-life in reverse. In three years it's supposed to turn into love and justice, after centuries of slavery and Jim Crow. We have too much privilege if we think we can be impatient with racism when it doesn't end on our schedule.

The families of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are gathering with the mother of Tyre Nichols in Memphis for her son's funeral. And there are thouands of loved ones across this culture who will be weeping again as their own loved ones come back in vivid memories and hushed conversations. And I think of Tortuguita, the climate activist recently killed by the police, down in the Weelaunee Forest on the poor side of Atlanta. And the waves of young suicides on the reservations. Ashley, if a second and a third summer of 2020 needs to take place, everyone needs to come back again and shout the names of the murder victims of police violence … . You'll be there, won't you? We have to be ready if the call goes out.

You ask — when does this end? Systemic racism is deep, and it's also in motion. It wants to survive like any profit center. Oppression is coming from many sources at once, it is like artificial intelligence blended into the surface of things. Many of the originating points of violence are hidden behind smiles of models in advertisements, hidden behind the thin blue line. We live in Militarized Consumerism.

I remember Angela Davis speaking in Washington, D.C., at the Women's March on the day after Trump's inauguration. She spoke from her life of resistance and she lifted her voice to speak of the love and beauty that persists even as the oppression threatens with its violence. We have not been able to schedule the end of hate. It has no expiration date. We can love in this moment, though, love and then keep loving as we get back to the justice work.

— REV BILLY

This piece, vignettes of a New York morning, should be read with friends! Divide the roles among yourselves and get into the rhythm of our residents.

Roles:
NARRATOR
STRANGER 1
STRANGER 2
SELLER
HOMELESS PERSON
KID 1
KID 2
DANCE INSTRUCTOR
DANCER

PLACES!

by Nakama.

NARRATOR:
Places!
Places!
Daybreak choreography
With two left feet
Means starting off
On the wrong one —

DANCE INSTRUCTOR:
We need Alvin Ailey at Lincoln Center, not showtime in the park, (BEAT) honey.

DANCER:
Good morning to you too.

NARRATOR:
Its too early for your scathing remarks ...
Impressed against
The haggard face
Of ATM terminals
Reflecting us
Is bumping into strangers
Aimlessly surveying
The Post —

STRANGER 1:
My fault g

STRANGER 2:
Nah its all good

NARRATOR:
In between Hail Mary's
Our dancers duck
Winston-armed periodicals/
Out the Civic window
Shuddered storefronts
Grounds for where
Spare change
Is an afterthought

HOMELESS PERSON:
Sorry for the interruption, ladies and gentlemen. My name is (BEAT)

NARRATOR
Patience!
Improvise connections
To high contrast,
silhouetted neighbors/
Congested
And
In-diff-er-ent
Incessant pedestrian traffic
Rubberneck on
Ware peddlers' accessories and goods —

STRANGER 1:
How much for a phone case and two packs of incense?

SELLER:
30 but for you I'll do 21.

NARRATOR
It's all maintaining space,
Commercial gain
Some courtesy reserved
In queue
Queens with the smudged beat
Behind the OSHA admin
Both want a turkey bacon egg and cheese
Commuter kids
Reaching for the Dunkaroos

KID 1:
You really gon' eat that whole pack?

KID 2:
Fuck is you talkin' bout, watch me —

KID 1:
Nah you buggin', let me get one (BEAT) or two.

NARRATOR
The minutia
Between them
Articulates
Posture points
Where conflicts
Of buoyancy occur
Afloat in the riptides
Of a morning's affinity
And collective negligence

SELLER:
AYE LOOK OUT —
Idiot knocking over my table ...

STRANGER 2:
Nobody want ya bum ass shea butter, relax.

DANCE INSTRUCTOR:
EXCUSE ME, WHY ARE WE NOT MOVING —

KID 2:
Cause they dummies.

STRANGER 1:
Cap, I'M moving this week.

DANCE INSTRUCTOR:
THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT —

KID 1:
Aight bet then! You gonna lower my rent.

HOMELESS PERSON:
Think that's hoping for the best kid.

DANCER:
Today is teaching me that what you get is what you get ...

(BEAT)

CAST IN UNISON:
Well yeah. What'd you expect?

NARRATOR
As far as they agree
Alliances of view
Are more opportune subterfuge
Than bonds they need to keep
Decorum for a crowded avenue
That rarely changes speed
Save for the first wave
Of waking agency
The flow of which
They're presumed to repeat
Places!
Places!

Nakama is a multimedia artist and performer from New York. They explore sonic and visual media as a means of connecting worlds and people, cognitively and in real time.

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FEBRUARY'S SHOWS

NOT ABOUT ME
BY EDUARDO MACHADO
JAN 13 -- FEB 5 WED to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

JOSEPH and MARSHA: A Play About Marsha P. Johnson
BY GARY LEGAULT
JAN 26 -- FEB 12 THUR to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

LIFE IS A ONE ACT PLAY
BY BINA SHARIF
JAN 26 -- FEB 12 THUR to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

FK BOY**
BY STEPHEN CORNINE
JAN 26 -- FEB 12 THUR to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

WHO MURDERED LOVE?
BY LISSA MORA & RICHARD WEST
FEB 12 -- FEB 19 THUR to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

MIDAS
BY DAVID ELYHA
FEB 9 -- FEB 26 THUR to sat @8PM, SUN @3PM

THE TIME TRAVELER'S CLUB
BY BARBARA KUHN
FEB 23 -- MAR 12 THUR to SAT @8PM, SUN @3PM

TICKETS: www.theaterforthenewcity.net
(212) 254-1109 - OR PURCHASE AT the DOOR